

IN SEARCH OF 'SELF': METAMORPHOSIS OF THE 'ARCHETYPAL' INDIAN WOMAN IN MANJU KAPUR'S FICTION

SHAMPA CHAKRAVARTHY

Abstract: This paper endeavors to explore the revolutionary transformation in the outlook of Indian women who in their desire for emancipation, choose to break away from the fetters of tradition and domesticity and set out in search of 'self' to redefine their existence in a society dominated by male ego. It is pertinent to note here that women's position in society is not a biological fact but a created one. The social position and roles assigned to women through civilizations have placed them in an inferior position to that of men. Indian English fiction emerged as a separate entity for the study of rapid change and development in social, economic, political and psychological facets of Indian society. Indian women novelists have strongly articulated their struggle for liberation and self-assertion through their inherent art of story-telling. Manju Kapur is a post-colonial writer whose novels stress upon woman's need for self-fulfilment, autonomy, self-realisation, independence, individuality and self-actualization. A post-colonial writer, Kapur's female protagonists are mostly educated aspiring individuals caged within the confines of a conservative society. Education leads them to independent thinking as a result of which their family and society become intolerant of them.

Key words: emancipation, domesticity, liberation

"I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will."
-Charlotte Bronte in 'Jane Eyre'.

Women are an integral part of human civilization. Although the place of women in society has differed across cultures and through ages, yet one fact common among all societies is that in spite of having the same mental and moral power, and having contributed equally in the nation's progress, women have never been considered equal to men. Rather, the term 'woman' has a pejorative connotation and is burdened with the weight of insignificance. For centuries together women have been denied justice in entirety- be it social, economic, political or constitutional and largely ignored as the 'weaker sex'. A woman's inferior position in society is not a biological fact but a created one. As noted feminist critic Simone de Beauvoir avers, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the female presents in society, it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...which is described as feminine."

Women are defined as marginalized creatures and viewed as appendages to men. In the male-dominated society she has been assigned the role of a wife, a daughter, a mother, a sister and a home-maker. Very peacefully and silently, she is expected to serve, sacrifice, submit and surrender to the demands of patriarchy. In other words, patriarchal institutions and social relations are responsible for the inferior or secondary status of women. Patriarchal society gives absolute priority to men both in public and private spheres and to some extent limits women's human rights also. Feminists use the term 'patriarchy' to

describe the power relationship between men and women as well as to find out the root cause of women's subordination. This goes on to explain that a woman's individual self has hardly any recognition in the patriarchal framework of society. Her position in society might have been glorified as that of Sita, Savitri, Gandhari or Damyanti. But unfortunately, one fails to notice that these epic or mythological characters are too idealistic and way behind, and, cut off from the reality of the trials and tribulations of modern world. Modern day women cannot fit into the frame of these surrealistic portraits of women. Under these circumstances, a growing desire among women's search for identity in a society of which she is an integral part seems only too natural. Lack of dignity, perpetual victimization, denial, deprivation and oppression by men are thus, a few factors responsible for a growing awareness of 'self' and its need for emancipation.

In a tradition-bound Hindu society that celebrated patriarchy, women were relegated to the margins. The Hindu moral code known as The Laws of Manu denied woman an existence apart from that of her husband or his family. However, noted Sindhi writer Popati Hiranandani observes that the real cause behind the subordination of women lies not in the scriptural laws, or in any flaws in women's nature but ironically in their innate filial and maternal instincts. She says, "A woman's maternal instincts, her attachment to the members of her family, her respect for her husband, her innate ability to manage her house are exploited in such a way that she is virtually made a slave of the man!"

The status of women in erstwhile India was very dismal but the nineteenth century marked the

beginnings of an awakening and renaissance with revolutionary ideas of social reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Raja Ram Mohan Roy among others. They worked hard towards freeing the society from ill-practices and customs of polygamy, 'purdah', child marriage, *sati-pratha* and fought for women's education and gender identity.

The nation's struggle for freedom played a vital role in the lives of Indian women. It propelled her onto the political and social scenario, and she too began to experience the prevalent reformist zeal. Freedom for the Indian woman meant freedom not only from British rule and its concomitant tyranny but a simultaneous release from centuries of male-domination and male-ordained social and cultural norms. The question of the relative status of women in society attracted the attention of many scholars all over the world. Modern women writers have portrayed their women as individuals rebelling against their traditional role, breaking the shackles of exploitation and oppression and awakening to a sense of identity to assert their individuality.

Indian women novelists too have been portraying women in varied manifestations. A major preoccupation in recent Indian Women's writings has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. In Indian culture and heritage, individualism, quest for identity, protests and concepts of rebelliousness have often remained alien ideas, as far as women were concerned. Women had to be obedient, quiet, submissive, and passive not claiming any of their rights either as women or as human beings and ever since the publication of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife in 1864* a significant number of authors have portrayed Indian women as long-suffering wives and mothers silenced by patriarchy.

Thus the image of the 'archetypal' woman manifested by early Indian women novelists portrayed women as silent sufferers, upholder of traditional values and ethics, a strict observer of social taboos, an epitome of tolerance and patience, an exemplar to their successors, a being with no space for herself, a woman without an identity (rather identified as subordinates to men) a worshipper of their counterparts, unfortunate and ignorant about their rights as humans, an anonymous being living in the shadow of her man.

While the post-colonial enigma gradually changed into a neo-colonial consciousness in India, the creative writers specially the woman factionalists resorted to examining the role of modern Indian women vis-à-vis family and society differently and more positively. With the advent of Feminism, Indian women writers brought incredible transformation in conformity to a specific genre in order to explore the

unexplored array of maladies; to reveal the explicit reality of the society and the plight of Indian women in society. Women were no longer characterized to surrender, submit and suffer to martyrdom. Women novelists began to unveil the hidden secrets and unfold the deliberate denials that are refutable in today's context. A whole band of women novelists beginning with Ruth Pravar Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandaya Arundhati Roy, Anita Nair, Manju Kapur, Namita Gokhale, Gita Hariharan, Shobha De and even the diasporic writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Shona Ramaya and others have presented various modes of resistance to patriarchal norms.

Although the earliest fiction in English by Indian women was written as early as in the mid nineteenth century, it is the works of post-colonial women writers that deserves a special mention here as their writings focus on the rapidly changing image of the 'archetypal' woman who is no longer a passive entity but is constantly in search of identity, selfhood, individuality and emotional independence. According to French feminist writer Helen Cixous, "Women must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven as violently as from their bodies."

In the light of the above arguments, the researcher intends to share glimpses of the journey of female protagonists in the works of one of the most acclaimed post-colonial woman novelist, Manju Kapur.

Manju Kapur and Her Works: Manju Kapur, a famous Indian English novelist was born in Amritsar. A Postgraduate from Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada, she teaches English at the Delhi University. Her writings reflect man-woman relationship, human desire, longing, body, gender discrimination, marginalization, rebellion and protest. The female protagonists in Manju Kapur's novels are caught in the continuous dichotomy between the personal needs and the institutional and social obligations and responsibilities. They challenge the male domination and patriarchal mechanisms of surveillance and control over women's body.

Till date she has written five novels- *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2002), *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2008) and *The Custody* (2011). Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize in 1999 and was a number one bestseller in India. *The Immigrant* was shortlisted for DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2011.

Manju Kapur's works centre around the middle class and her readers are often stunned by her sharply-etched characters and emotional settings. Her themes

almost always are women-centric and revolve around the issues of home and family. She confesses....

“I have been forever interested in the lives of women, whether in the professional arena or in domestic spaces. One of the pre-occupations in all my books is how women manage both and what sacrifices they have to make in order to keep the home-fires burning and sanity in personal lives.”

Manju Kapur’s first novel *Difficult Daughters* (1998) is a tale of the protagonist’s struggle for career and identity against the dominant ideology of domesticity. Set around the turbulent years of World War II and the partition of India, she realistically depicts women of three generations focusing on Virmati, the difficult daughter of the second generation. The novel is the story of a woman torn between family duty, the desire for education and illicit love. The search for control over one’s destiny is the key theme. While India fights for freedom from the British Raj, Virmati fights for the freedom to live life on her terms. The novelist has portrayed her protagonists as women caught between the passion of the flesh and a yearning to be part of political and intellectual movements.

A Married Woman, (2002) explores Astha’s longing for a purpose in her life other than being a wife and mother against a vividly realized backdrop of Indian sectarian politics. It presents an interesting collage of the problems, insecurities and unrest faced by middle class woman and nation both on the verge of transition. The author presents a lesbian relationship between Astha and Pipeelika but in the end regularity norms are set to play to confine women’s sexuality within the framework of heteronormativity- i.e. relationship that are monogamous, within marriage and often with opposite sex.

The novel *Home* (2006) exposes the still prevalent parochial attitudes towards the upbringing of the girl child in India. She traces the painful voyage of the heroine Nisha from childhood to adulthood, the likes of a *bildungsroman*. *Home* details Nisha’s search for a home i.e. search for a place of shelter and security. Unfortunately for women in India, home is not a place of comfort and relaxation and it does not ensure them any emotional security, or for that matter even physical security. The novel unravels the story of the life of an ordinary middle class joint family set in Delhi.

In her novel *The Immigrant* (2008), Kapur explores the special challenges facing immigrant wives, the way a young woman’s life already under pressure in professional and reproductive terms becomes an even more impossible balancing act within a foreign culture. Nina finds she is not only ill-prepared for the cultural gulf she encounters but also the gaping distances (intellectual, emotional and physical) in her

barren relationship. Sexual inadequacy turns into security and then infidelity. Kapur explores the adjustments and frustrations of a modern marriage.

Manju Kapur’s fifth novel *Custody* (2011) is not just a social commentary, but a novel that is true to the universal angst of modern marriage, with its burden of individualism. It is set in the thriving, upper middle class colonies of Delhi in the mid-nineties, against the backdrop of the initial surge of foreign investment in India. Shagun is a modern woman who fulfills her individual dreams instead of familial fulfillment. She is an ambitious woman who is over-ridden by individualism and her own well-being. The novel charts the life of a changing woman in the backdrop of increased globalization. It chronicles the various intricacies around the dissolution of marriage and a family in modern India. The novel shows that a childless marriage is despised. The blame is attributed to the female. Female infertility is recognised as a ground for divorce.

In many ways, Kapur’s novels seem to be autobiographical in tone. Speaking to Nidhi Sethi she recalls:

“I felt homesick when I was a student in Canada. I felt alienated and nostalgic, so I wanted to write about the whole experience. Moreover, I write about things I know well, though I set them in an imaginative mould. But I did make an exception when I drew some of the details from my mother’s life for my first novel.”

Manju Kapur, portrays women who are on the threshold of self-discovery and have suddenly decided to take their lives into their own hands. They are women who are searching for strength and independence. She focuses on the inner strength possessed by women as human beings. Her works encourage our understanding in terms of women who are each caught in a net of relationships that are partly made by them and partly made for them.

The female characters in the novels of Manju Kapur illustrate a problem often faced by women in Indian society, that of the women’s inner struggle between the desire to take care of her husband and children and the desire to discover deeper modes of fulfillment that fall outside the traditional social norms. Her female protagonists resist and overcome the ideological suppression and reshape ideals and existing value system to re-invent themselves in a meaningful way. In this sense, her novels are a significant contribution towards the realm of Indian English Fiction and feminist psycho-analysis in India. Thus, Manju Kapur highlights those issues of feminism that are endemic to the situation in India in order to help us understand how difficult it is for women here to arrive at an evolved state of mind being trapped within the matrix of religion and

tradition . The protagonists in her works manifest women's struggle for emancipation from economic, political and social bondages. She has tried to evolve her own stream of emergence of new women grounded in reality.

Women, observed an eminent critic are "good story-tellers; they can easily grasp, absorb and bring to light the prevailing condition in society. With their inborn potential and capacity for tolerance, love and compassion they are able to see the world through female perspective, project their feelings in a more subtle, sensitive and humanitarian manner." Although the earlier writings of Indian women project the traditional image of a woman, as time passed the writings became realistic with a new thrust on a woman's sense of frustration and alienation. The characters were torn apart by conflicting forces of tradition and modernity. A typical woman plays the role of a daughter, mother, wife and daughter-in-law without feeling the need to assert herself. In the process the 'self' is totally forgotten. As Mary Warnock observes, "authentic existence can begin only when we have realized and understood what we are. Once we have grasped that, human reality is characterized by the fact that each

human being is, uniquely himself and no one else, and that each of us has his own responsibilities to fulfill." Manju Kapur too is convinced that the new educated Indian woman is capable of establishing her own identity transcending the barriers of oppression and patriarchal pressure. The 'self' in her is no longer a victim of social ostracism. Although one cannot deny the fact that the conflict for autonomy and separate identity remains an unfinished combat, Manju Kapur's novels encapsulate women's liberation and their 'quest for identity' and her protagonists metamorphose into a 'new woman' on the path of self-discovery.

In the light of these arguments, the present paper seeks to analyze the attitudinal change in women and how they negotiate the outside world. As Kapur observes, the metamorphosis is 'a delicate balancing act'. While exploring individual yearnings amidst familial demands, one should have strong self-commitment. The protagonists in all the novels of Kapur are seen following their own diktat. This is all because of an increasing level of awareness among women who are conscious of their needs and their growing desire for progress.

References:

1. Asnani, Shyam (1987) *New Dimensions of Indian English Novel*, Doaba House, Delhi.
2. Beauvoir, Simone De.(1988) *The Second Sex*, Tran.& ed. H.M Parshley, London: Picador Classics.
3. Dhawan, R.K, ed. Introduction: Indian Women Novelists, Set I, Vol. I, New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991
4. Ghosh, Arpita. "Women's Vulnerability to Violence as Portrayed in the Novels of Manju Kapur": Literary Insight. Vol.4 January, 2013
5. Shobana P Mathews, Dr Nirmal Selvamony, Making Sense of Sound: Reading the Songs of Mark ; English Studies International Research Journal : Volume 2 Issue 1 (2014) ISSN 2347-3479, Pg 52-54
6. Iyengar, Srinivas.(1985) *Indian Writing in English*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers.
7. Kapur, Manju (1998) *Difficult Daughters*, Faber and Faber, London.
8. _____. (2003) *A Married Woman*, Faber and Faber, London.
9. _____. (2006) *Home*, Random House Publishers, New Delhi, India.
10. Ms. Sharmila Narayana, Dr.R.Rajagopal, Suppression to Self-Assertion: Mapping the Progress ; English Studies International Research Journal : Volume 2 Issue 1 (2014) ISSN 2347-3479, Pg 55-58
11. _____. (2008) *The Immigrant*, Random House Publishers, New Delhi, India.
12. _____. (2011) *Custody*, Faber and Faber, London.
13. Kaur, Satbir.(2009) *Shashi Deshpande: A Feministic Interpretation*. Unistar, Chandigarh.
14. Kumar, Ashok (2006) "Portrayal of New Women; A Study of Manju Kapur's A Married
15. Dr. Md. Sahidul Islam, The Plight of Afghan Women During the Reign ; English Studies International Research Journal : Volume 2 Issue 1 (2014) ISSN 2347-3479, Pg 59-61
16. *Woman in Indian writing in English": Critical Ruminations*. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons.
17. Naik, M.K & Shyamala A. Narayan (2011) *Indian English Literature 1980-2000*
18. *A Critical Survey*, Delhi: Pencraft International.
19. Naik, M.K & Shyamala A. Narayan (2009) *Indian English Fiction :A Critical Study*, Delhi: Pencraft International.

-
22. Nawale, Arvind M. (2011) *Indian Writing in English: Speculations and Observations*, Delhi: Authorspress.
23. Vakulabharanam Anantalakshmi, Language Projects: An innovative Practice in ELT; English Studies International Research Journal : Volume 2 Issue 1 (2014) ISSN 2347-3479, Pg 62-64
24. ____.(2012) *Feminine Fragrance: Reflections on Women's Writing in English*, New Delhi: GNOSIS.
25. Nabar, Vrinda. *Caste As Woman*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, India. 1995.
26. Sarbjit K. Sandhu (1991)*The Image Of Woman In The Novels Of Shashi Deshpande*, New Delhi: Prestige Books.
27. Gurmeet Sodhi, Using Short Stories and interesting Literary Texts ; English Studies International Research Journal : Volume 2 Issue 1 (2014) ISSN 2347-3479, Pg 65-66
28. Sethi, Nidhi. "Desire to Inspire", *literati, The Asian Age*. September 22, 2011
29. Sinha, Sunita (2008) "Discovery of Daring and Desire in Manju Kapur's Fiction": Post Colonial Women Writers. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers.
30. Warnock, Mary. (1977) *Existentialism*. London: Oxford University Press

Shampa Chakravarthy/ Head, Department of English/ P.E.Society's Modern College of Arts, Science & Commerce/ Ganeshkhind/ Pune-411016/